

POLICY ESSAY

PROBLEM-ORIENTED POLICING

Setting a higher standard for the evaluation of problem-oriented policing initiatives

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Approximately 30 years have passed since Herman Goldstein (1979) first articulated the basic principles of problem-oriented policing. During those years, problem-oriented policing emerged as a widely practiced approach to crime prevention in police departments throughout the United States as well as throughout the world. Problem-oriented policing enjoys broad support from federal agencies, professional policing groups, and a small cadre of scholars interested in effective crime prevention practices. Given this support, it was surprising to learn that Weisbord, Telep, Hinkle and Eck (2010, this issue) identified only ten evaluations that met the minimum methodological standards of their systematic review—a comparison group that did not receive the problem-oriented policing treatment. Their systematic review also identified 45 before-after intervention studies without a strong control or comparison group.

To some observers, a ratio of one strong evaluation to every four or five weak evaluations might not sound overly concerning. Weak evaluations, unfortunately, provide less valid answers to policy questions when compared with well-designed quasi-experiments and randomized controlled trials (Campbell and Stanley, 1966; Cook and Campbell, 1979). Several crime and justice scholars suggest that a “moral imperative” exists in pursuing the most rigorous evaluation designs to discover whether a program is effective (e.g., Boruch, 1975; Weisbord, 2003). Isolating the effects of treatments or programs from other confounding aspects of selection or design is viewed as one of the evaluator’s most important obligations to society. When the evaluation evidence base is informed largely by weak designs, practitioners risk implementing certain treatments or programs as effective crime prevention practices when they are not, which can lead to significant economic and social costs.

Much of the academic work on problem-oriented policing seeks to improve practice by refining key steps in the process such as encouraging the in-depth analysis of problems and searching

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for innovative responses that go beyond traditional enforcement. Unfortunately, although these academics press practitioners to conduct more rigorous assessments of implemented prevention strategies, they also tend to be dismissive of the use of more rigorous research designs, such as randomized controlled trials, in evaluating the crime prevention effects of problem-oriented policing initiatives. This apparent bias against more rigorous designs is certainly a contributing factor to the weak scientific evidence base for the problem-oriented policing approach. Beyond increasing the openness of problem-oriented policing scholars to include stronger research designs, investments need to be made to develop strong working relationships with police practitioners so that opportunities can be created to conduct more rigorous evaluations.

Can Problem-Oriented Policing Be Properly Evaluated Using More Rigorous Designs?

The problem-oriented policing movement has benefited greatly from the hard work of a few academics, such as Herman Goldstein, Ronald V. Clarke, Nick Tilley, John E. Eck, Johannes Knutsson, and others who are concerned about the quality and effectiveness of policing. These academics have made a concerted effort to improve the quality of problem analysis, identify alternative approaches to deal with the underlying conditions and situations that cause recurring problems to exist, as well as disseminate examples of successful problem-oriented policing projects through conference participation, the production of practitioner-friendly guides, and strategic partnerships with governmental agencies such as the U.S. Office of Community-Oriented Policing Services. Indeed, these scholars deserve much credit for stimulating interest in the problem-oriented policing approach in police departments around the world.

These academics are vocal in lamenting the poor quality of practitioner-led assessments of problem-oriented policing projects and conclude that police departments need considerable support from academic partners to carry out evaluations (e.g., Clarke, 1998). Although they advocate for a range of evaluation methodologies, these academics are often skeptical of using more rigorous evaluation designs to evaluate problem-oriented policing projects (Eck, 2002; Knutsson, 2009; Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Tilley, 2009). Randomized controlled trials, in particular, are described in a discouraging manner. They suggest that problem-oriented policing interventions are highly customized for specific local problems and, as such, often are not amenable to rigorous designs that rule out threats to internal validity. Experimental evaluations of problem-oriented policing also are described as “academic research projects” with low external validity that does not reflect the reality of problem-oriented policing as it is practiced in the field (Knutsson, 2009: 20).

These problem-oriented policing scholars suggest that single group before-after designs are the modal assessment methodology to evaluate problem-oriented policing interventions, and they argue that it is much more feasible and fruitful to decrease threats to internal validity through different means such as adding qualitative evidence, using time-series data, investigating possible alternative causal hypotheses, or being guided by precise theory (Eck, 2002; Knutsson, 2009; Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Tilley, 2009). This pragmatic view has generated compelling

case studies and a growing body of practical evidence that supports problem-oriented policing as a promising approach to crime prevention (Skogan and Frydl, 2004; Weisburd and Eck, 2004). Unfortunately, this practical approach to generate knowledge on improved police crime prevention practices is problematic in regard to generating more rigorous scientific evidence in the long term. If academics interested in exploring the effects of problem-oriented policing on crime are not being encouraged by their peers to use more rigorous research designs, then problem-oriented policing will never have a strong evaluation research base. As “evidence-based” approaches, with their premium on rigorous evaluation designs, gain currency in policy circles, funding for continued expansion of the problem-oriented policing agenda might be threatened.

In reality, fewer police departments will be willing to host more intrusive research designs such as randomized controlled trials. As Eck (2002) described, there are many reasons why police departments might not be willing to play host to an experiment—the department might have other pressing business, the department’s leadership might not be tested, and other reasons. When a police department is willing to engage a more rigorous design, the external validity of the findings are called into question because the host departments and their contexts are described as not representative of all agencies or contexts that use the intervention. Drawing on Campbell and Stanley (1966), Eck (2002: 104) identified this issue as a problem of the “interaction of selection and treatment.”

Although this point is legitimate, all problem-oriented policing evaluations suffer from external validity concerns regardless of the degree of internal rigor in the evaluation research design. Problem-oriented policing is primarily an analytic approach to crime prevention that requires customizing interventions to highly localized crime and disorder problems. What works in preventing a street robbery problem in the public areas of Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, might not work when applied to repeated robberies occurring in the London Underground subway system. Appropriate interventions need to be applied in both contexts that are based on careful analysis of the conditions that create the compelling criminal opportunities. Neither the evaluation findings of a carefully constructed single group before-after design nor the findings of a randomized controlled experiment will travel perfectly across these settings. Problem-oriented policing evaluations of many forms provide valuable guidance to police officers struggling with real-world problems. However, given the highly customized nature of effective problem-oriented policing interventions, it is important to recognize that the generalizability of specific crime prevention practices identified in an effective application of the approach might be limited, regardless of the evaluation approach used.

Randomized controlled trials and more rigorous quasi-experimental designs can be developed to maximize their external validity. A well-designed test can collect the necessary qualitative and quantitative data to understand the processes that underlie problem-oriented policing and “why” it might impact crime and disorder problems. For instance, the units of analysis in the evaluation design—whether they are problem places, problem people, hot products, or some other unit—must be analyzed thoroughly to ensure equivalent treatment and control groups.

Although this task is time consuming, it is by no means insurmountable through established matching techniques (that range from descriptive exercises to more formal propensity score analyses) and subsequent allocation from like pairs or statistically comparable blocks to treatment and control conditions. The thorough description of problem units provides police practitioners with important information regarding the problems addressed in the study so that they can determine whether any effective interventions are applicable to problems faced in their local jurisdictions.

Rigorous evaluation designs can accommodate the reality of problem-oriented policing as practiced in the field. An important consideration in gaining real-world insights on the crime prevention value of problem-oriented policing in dealing with crime and disorder problems is to test the general approach rather than any specific set of tactics. In two randomized controlled experiments (Braga and Bond, 2008; Braga, Weisburd, Waring, Mazerolle, Spelman, and Gajewski, 1999), the treatment was the meta-method known as “problem-oriented policing,” which comprised several specific operational tactics implemented by the officers to control the identified problems at treatment places.¹ Careful quantitative and qualitative documentation of the content of these problem-oriented interventions provided police practitioners with a clear sense of the types of responses to address problem places so that they can develop knowledge on a range of strategies that could be plausibly effective in their jurisdictions. Indeed, both experiments documented interventions that closely resembled problem-oriented policing as it is usually practiced in the field—“shallow” problem solving characterized by weak problem analysis and limited response development.

When interventions are described in sufficient detail, further analyses, such as mediation analysis, can be used to determine the key elements of the intervention that seem to be driving any observed crime control gains. Using this approach, a randomized controlled trial of problem-oriented policing in Lowell, Massachusetts, found that the strongest crime prevention gains at crime and disorder hot spots were driven by situational prevention strategies rather than by misdemeanor arrest strategies or short-term, police-led social service strategies (Braga and Bond, 2008). Because many jurisdictions deal with crime and disorder hot spot locations, the basic findings of this study provide important guidance to police executives interested in maximizing their ability to manage similar problem places.

Creating the Opportunity to Conduct More Rigorous Evaluations

Academics must work to create the opportunities to test problem-oriented policing interventions using more rigorous designs with higher degrees of internal validity. Unfortunately, past partnerships between academics and police practitioners often are characterized by role conflicts such as researchers reporting the “bad news” that an evaluated program was not effective in preventing crime (Weisburd, 1994). For academic researchers, success or failure matters less

1. The Braga and Bond (2008) randomized controlled trial was completed after Weisburd et al. (2010) finished their systematic search for eligible problem-oriented policing studies and, as such, is not included in their review.

than their commitment to the development of knowledge of what does or does not work in preventing crime. For police practitioners, this news could be interpreted as their personal failure, and the skepticism of academics could be viewed as irritating. The police also can view traditional research and evaluation roles played by academics (often involving data collection and analysis *after* programs have been developed) as not particularly helpful in their efforts to prevent crime.

In recent years, however, the demand for the participation of academic researchers in problem-oriented policing projects has increased because the police have come to recognize the importance of strategic information products in developing effective crime prevention interventions. Academics can help the police by conducting research on urban crime problems to focus limited enforcement, intervention, and prevention resources on high-risk offenders, victims, and places. Problem-oriented interventions based on research insights have been associated with a 60% reduction in youth homicide in Boston (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, and Piehl, 2001) and a 40% total homicide reduction in Indianapolis (McGarrell, Chermak, Wilson, and Corsaro, 2006). These success stories have made academic researchers an important part of new crime prevention initiatives. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice-sponsored Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) initiative provided each of the 94 U.S. Attorney's districts with funds to hire academic research partners to help understand and address serious gun violence problems in local jurisdictions. A recent national evaluation of PSN found that treatment cities with high levels of implementation, which include in-depth problem analysis research to tailor prevention strategies, were associated with declines in violent crime (McGarrell et al., 2009).

The increasing police openness to the assistance of academics in understanding the nature of crime problems provides an important opportunity to develop higher quality evaluations of problem-oriented policing interventions. As a partner in the problem-oriented policing process, academics can make a case for using a more rigorous research design to assess the implemented interventions. Many current police executives understand the importance of determining "what works" in police crime prevention efforts.² Savvy police executives also understand that simple pre-post analyses of time-series data are not scientifically rigorous enough to provide strong evidence of a program effect. Indeed, the strong skepticism and dismissive assertions made by certain academics in their assessment of the role of innovative policing strategies in the 1990s crime drop (e.g., Levitt, 2004) made an impression on the police profession. Although some police executives (most notably former New York Police Commissioner and former Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton) attacked the credibility of "ivory tower" academics in assessing police crime prevention strategies, others such as Redlands, California, Police Chief James Bueerman and former Jersey City, New Jersey, Police Chief Francis Gajewski opened

2. For instance, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), which has police chiefs completely comprise its board of directors, states "substantial and purposeful academic study is a prerequisite for acquiring, understanding and adding to the body of knowledge of professional police management" as one of its organizational principles. PERF also published an edited volume of essays called *Police Program Evaluation* that makes the case that meaningful program evaluation often requires going beyond piecemeal observations or simple "before and after" comparisons (Hoover, 1997).

their departments to academics looking to conduct rigorous tests of problem-oriented policing strategies (e.g., Braga et al., 1999; Weisbord, Morris, and Ready, 2008).³

Although other important factors undoubtedly exist, ongoing collaborative relationships between police executives and academics create opportunities to conduct rigorous evaluations of problem-oriented policing initiatives. In an inspiring description of her rewarding experiences as an “embedded” criminologist in California’s prison reform efforts, Joan Petersilia (2008) rightly observed that “timing is *everything*” when working with policy makers and criminal justice practitioners. Her observation is particularly salient when considering the legal, political, institutional, and resource constraints inherent in the successful execution of randomized controlled trials in criminal justice agencies.

Throughout the course of a long-standing collaborative relationship with a police executive, “timing” directly affected my ability to conduct more rigorous evaluations of problem-oriented policing initiatives. In 1997, I formed a collaborative relationship with Edward F. Davis III when he was Superintendent of the Lowell Massachusetts Police Department. During the next 6 years, my colleagues and I worked with the Lowell Police on a series of problem analyses of gang violence problems and conducted a quasi-experimental evaluation of a problem-oriented intervention to guide their gang violence reduction efforts (Braga, McDevitt, and Pierce, 2006; Braga, Pierce, McDevitt, Bond, and Cronin, 2008). In 2004, Davis expressed a desire to make a substantive contribution to the policing field by conducting a more rigorous test of the effects of problem-oriented policing strategies on crime and disorder hot spots (see Braga and Bond, 2008). We collaborated on the design of a randomized controlled experiment and jointly made a successful argument to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety for research funds. It is important to note that, at that point in time, Davis had served as the chief of the Lowell Police for nearly 10 years, crime was low in the city, research funding was available, and Davis had gained considerable trust and legitimacy among community members and politicians through his commitment to community policing. In other words, the timing was ripe for experimentation.

In December 2006, Davis was appointed Commissioner of the Boston Police Department. Boston was facing a troubling increase in gun violence when he took charge of the police force. Davis immediately led the department in developing a problem-oriented policing initiative that targeted gun violence hot spots in Boston that borrowed heavily from the lessons of the Lowell experiment and other evidence-based crime prevention practices. However, at that point in time, I could not pursue a randomized controlled trial of the new program. The resulting evaluation design was the modal single group before–after design supplemented by qualitative evidence and longer time-series data. Indeed, the conditions were different in Boston compared with Lowell a few years earlier. His mandate from Mayor Thomas M. Menino was clear. Davis needed to

3. In his memoir on crime fighting in Boston and New York City, Bratton (1998: 289) stated that “Criminologists apparently still had a hard time accepting the reality of our success. I made a conscious decision to take on the academics, to challenge conventional wisdom about crime in America and prove that effective policing can make a substantial impact on social change.”

make Boston's neighborhoods safe by addressing the gun violence wherever it presented itself in the city. He was also a new chief who needed to develop the necessary political support to permit potentially controversial decisions such as creating treatment and control conditions in gun violence hot spots.

These experiences suggest that academics need to be "commonsense opportunists" who are sensitive to the varying needs of their practitioner partners throughout the course of a long-term working relationship. Sometimes academics can pursue more rigorous evaluation designs. Other times academics will need to respect the political environment and simply provide program development and implementation advice that is rooted in solid research evidence.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this policy essay was not to make an argument that all evaluations of problem-oriented policing need to be randomized controlled trials. Indeed, weaker evaluations can, and do, produce important findings. Case studies on the problem-oriented policing process can provide rich insights and much-needed guidance to practitioners struggling with substantive public safety problems. Nevertheless, the Weisburd et al. (2010) review suggests that the need is for more rigorous research in this important area. Weaker evaluations outnumber the stronger evaluations by almost five times. Problem-oriented policing scholars, who are mostly likely to be in the position to conduct such studies, should recognize the importance of developing a stronger evidence base for the approach and foster an environment that encourages more rigorous research designs.

To some observers, long-term working relationships as described in this essay might violate the purported scientific necessity to separate program developer and evaluator roles (for discussion, see Petrosino and Soyden, 2005). However, unless some convincing evidence of widespread evaluator bias is associated with such arrangements, these collaborative arrangements seem necessary to put academics in the position of being able to conduct higher quality evaluations of problem-oriented policing initiatives. As David Olds (2009) suggested in his recent essay in support of "disciplined passion," balancing scientific integrity with the practical challenges that are associated with program evaluation in real-world settings needs to be addressed through higher standards for reporting trials, better peer review, improved investigator training, and rigorous collegial support of those who choose this line of work.

Although this essay focused on evaluation and assessment issues, it is important to recognize that a large gap continues to exist between Goldstein's (1979) vision of problem-oriented policing and its implementation by most police departments. Research has documented that it is difficult for police officers to implement problem-oriented policing strategies (Clarke, 1998; Cordner and Biebel, 2005; Eck and Spelman, 1987). Deficiencies exist in all phases of the problem-oriented policing process. Growing evidence suggests that even the imperfect implementation of problem-oriented policing (so-called "shallow" problem solving) generates crime prevention gains (Braga and Weisburd, 2006). Improving the problem-oriented policing process, however, could produce even stronger crime control effects. Police executives interested in improving the

capacity of their agency to deal with crime through more robust problem solving should seek the involvement of academics the same way that they seek assistance from community partners and other city departments. Beyond evaluation, academics can be helpful in improving the quality of problem analysis and broadening the search for alternative responses.

Federal funding initiatives (similar to PSN) that provide support for academic–police practitioner partnerships could raise the quality of problem-oriented policing projects and improve our knowledge base on effective practice. Unfortunately, the number of academics with the experience and expertise in working with police departments on problem analysis, response development, and evaluation is relatively small. Although additional funding provides an incentive, the real challenge is to increase these collaborations by educating police departments on the benefits of working with academics and to encourage uninvolved academics to learn more about and participate in problem-oriented policing projects. Establishing new and more productive relationships will require flexibility and openness on both parts. Academics cannot be condescending in their relationships with the police; they must demonstrate a genuine interest in helping the police to be more effective, and they should select research methodologies that produce credible results but are not disproportionately demanding given the limits of available data as well as the nature of the strategy being evaluated (Goldstein, 2003). The police must recognize that quality research takes time and patience, researchers must be objective and require facts to support conclusions, and evaluations might produce results that could be interpreted as critical of past and current operations (Goldstein, 2003).

In the brief space given to this policy essay, all factors necessary to produce effective working partnerships between academics and police practitioners cannot be covered adequately. It does seem obvious that both camps as well as the general public would benefit greatly from a sustained collaborative relationship focused on understanding the nature of crime problems and on determining what works in dealing with the underlying conditions and situations that cause them to persist.

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